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ABSTRACT

The Southwest Regional Laboratory (SWRL) Mod 2 Reading Program is planned as a four-year program (K-3) for teaching reading skills to primary-grade children. The materials from the first- and second-year reading programs are designed with the following two goals in mind: to identify sentence structures that are beyond the syntactic capacity of the child at a given level, and to indicate areas where more complex sentence structures could be used. Implications for further development are also presented. (Author/RB)

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Charles Jenkins and Stephen Krashen

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Materials from the SWRL First and Second Year Mod 2 Reading Programs were with two goals in mind: to identify structures that are clearly beyond the syntactic capacity of the child at a given level, and to indicate areas where more complex structures could be used. Implications for further development are presented

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SYNTAX CONSIDERATIONS IN STORIES FOR BEGINNING READERS

Charles Jenkins and Stephen Krashen

A REVIEW OF THE SYNTAX OF THE MOD 2 SYAP STORIES

A problem any beginning reading program must face is the child's comprehension of the materials he reads. The goal of all reading instruction is that the child retain the substance of what he reads, and not simply produce the language sounds symbolized by the marks on the page. To attain the former goal, the child must make the association between those sounds and the language he already knows and controls. One way to facilitate this association is to have the reading materials presented to the child agree as much as possible with the language he knows and controls. This implies that insofar as possible, the continuous discourse presented in early reading instruction should be composed in the Standard Spoken English Dialect (SSE). When materials are presented to the child in the Literary English Dialect (LE), the child's task is compounded. He not only has to learn the rules for translating the marks on the paper into language sounds, he also has to deal with what may be new rules for translating the resulting LE language materials into the SSE which he can understand and comprehend. Although the child has to learn the rules for translation of LE to SSE (and vice versa) at some point, early introduction to this task may prove to be detrimental to his initial acquisition of comprehension skills.

To elaborate this conjecture, stories composed for tryouts of the early levels of the Mod 2 reading purpose were reviewed. The paper presents the informal analysis with commentary.

FIRST YEAR STORIES

First-year stories make extensive use of the unmarked present tense, where the progressive would be appropriate to SSE. For example, in the first story, the caption "I go" appears under a picture of a frog jumping from one lily pad to another. (See also stories 3, 5, 6, 7, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28, 32, 33, and 35.)

There is a limited class of verbs in English (e.g., see, say, know, understand, etc.), technically termed "stative verbs," which are always unmarked in the present tense. A far larger class of verbs (certainly making up a majority of the verbs appropriate for the early levels of a reading program), technically termed "process verbs," includes verbs of action. It is normally ungrammatical or unacceptable to use the unmarked form of process verbs to indicate action at the present time. The unmarked form of process verbs is used to denote habitual action, but this does not seem to be the sense intended in the stories (e.g., the difference between the (a) and (b) versions of the following sentences:

a) I beat my wife. [habitual]
b) I am beating my wife. [present]

a) He speaks gibberish. [habitual]
b) He is speaking gibberish. [present]

As exemplified above, the proper form for expressing the present time of a process verb is the "be ___ ing" structure (e.g., "I am ___ ing," "you are ___ ing," "he is ___ ing," etc.). There may be good reasons, for not introducing forms of be, such as am or are as sight words of the Mod 2 program earlier than they are introduced. It is clear that early introduction of the -ing suffix probably violates some word length constraints. But from a syntax perspective, it would be desirable to

introduce some form of "be," most probably "am," and the suffix "ing" during the first few lessons.

The first year stories also use the pronoun "I" by itself. In the first story, a frog gestures toward himself in the manner of an introduction. The caption is "I."

Pronouns in English are marked for case (e.g., "I-my-me," "he-his-him," etc. illustrating the nominative, genitive, and accusative cases, respectively). When a pronoun is used by itself in English, without a sentence context, it is always in the accusative case (i.e., me, you, him, her, it, us, them). The nominative form will only be used in the context of other sentential structures. For example, using (*) to denote ungrammatical (incorrect) sentences (a standard manner of indicating ungrammatical sentences in linguistic writing), note the following correct and incorrect replies to the question "Who said that?"

Me!
*I!
*Me did!
I did!

This problem in the stories could be solved by early introduction of both "me" and "I" as sight words, or by introducing the animal's name as a sight word, to be used in non-sentence contexts until the introduction of "me" later in the program.

SECOND YEAR STORIES

Comments on the Second year stories follow in terms of specific "advice to writers."

1. Use full relative clauses (i.e., containing the relative pronoun) wherever possible. Children have difficulty (Brown, 1970; summarized in Hatch, 1970b) (and adults do also with relative

clauses of certain degree of complexity, see Miller & Isard, 1964) handling relative clauses from which the pronoun has been deleted.

For example, instead of:

The boy I saw came home.

use:

The boy that I saw came home.

2. Use simple tenses wherever possible (this includes the simple progressive). Although the child is able to handle some of the auxiliary verb system of English, at this age level he may have trouble with the past tenses marked by the various forms of has and had (Hatch, 1970).

For example,

She bent down to get it, but Bob had picked it up. (SYAP Fiction Story #2).

may be simpler as,

...but Bob already had it (simple past) or
...but Bob picked it up first.

3. If anything in the sentence is to be negative, cast the whole sentence in the form of a negative. If this is not done, children may have trouble identifying which of the constituent parts the negative attaches to (e.g., say "I don't have a partridge in a pear tree that my true love gave to me" rather than "I have no partridge in a pear tree that my true love gave to me") (Hatch, 1970a).

For example,

I have no gold (SYAP Fantasy Story #46).

might be simpler as,

I don't have any gold.

4. Avoid cleft or pseudo-cleft sentences if at all possible. Examples of each are given below and the attached short note by Charles Fillmore (Appendix A) may prove valuable by giving another example. Cleft and pseudo-cleft sentences are very complex structures, and (probably) not very prevalent in either the child's language or the language to which he is exposed.

An example of the cleft is:

It was I who wanted to get the bull. (SYAP Fantasy Story #39).

A possible alternative is simply: I wanted to get the bull.

An example of the pseudo-cleft is:

All I wanted was to play (SYAP Fiction Story #20).

A possible alternative is: I just wanted to play.

5. The best way to express future time is to use a "going to" construction. Prescriptivists may object, but it is the form the child uses, and is frequently more natural than the full form of "will" (although the contracted form I'll, you'll, he'll, etc., is almost as frequent). For instance, "I'm going to go home" is easier for the child than "I will go home," although "I'll go home" is just as good.

For example,

I will ride it (SYAP Fiction Story #6).

the more natural is,

I'm going to ride it.

6. got is a better passive structure than be. Prescriptivists are again sensitive on this point. However, abundant evidence suggests that the child is able to master the so-called "got-passive" sooner and easier than the "be-passive." Use of the got-passive also avoids an ambiguity that might arise from interpreting the verbal particles in passive sentences as adjectives. For instance, the sentence:

   1) I got hurt.

   has only one possible interpretation, while:

   2) I was hurt.

   has two. See also Hatch (1970a).

RELAXING AND IMPOSING CONSTRAINTS ON WRITERS

At the First year level, it would be desirable to relax constraints on writers so that the progressive tense may be fully used. The nominative form of pronouns should be avoided in isolation.

At the Second year level, the following writer constraints appear in order: use full relative clauses and avoid reduced relative clauses, use simple tenses and avoid the present perfect and past perfect, use sentence negative instead of constituent negation, and avoid clefts. Writers can freely use the "going to" future and the "got" passive.

APPENDIX A

A CONTRIBUTION TO THE REPERTORY OF EXAMPLES

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A stacked relative clause construction (or, simply, a stacked relative) is a construction in which a relative clause modifies a nominal construction already containing a relative clause. A cleft sentence is a sentence one of whose constituents is introduced by anticipatory IT.[1] A sentence which exhibits simultaneously stackedness and cleavage is the following:

IT'S MY BUXOM COUSIN WHO'S WEARING A LOW-CUT SWEATER
THAT'S A GOOD EXAMPLE OF A CLEFT STACKED RELATIVE.

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[1]It's extremely important to distinguish cleft sentences from pseudo-cleft sentences. Instances of cleavage have IT in front; instances of pseudo-cleavage have WHAT in front.

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